

Teaching Reading in L2 : a Case for Including Extensive Reading

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1 . Introduction

Reading is a cognitive process that is often taken for granted, especially in countries with high literacy rates like Japan. Reading in a second language or L2 is not taken for granted by most ELF professionals, but when examining the curriculum of English language departments in Japan it becomes apparent that a divergence in teaching methods exists. For example, most universities have required English reading courses that focus on the traditional method of transferring what is read in L2 back into the consciousness of L1. Does this type of reading really benefit our students ?

It is no secret that the ability of Japanese students to successfully read in English is quite low when considering the number of hours spent trying to learn English. Without berating Japanese learners of English, one only needs to look at where Japan ranks internationally as country on students taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as verification of their poor reading ability in English. Granted reading in English only comprises about a quarter of that test, but the fact still remains that Japan ranked 64 out of 104 countries where students took the TOEFL test.

(http://www.ets.org/research/policy_reports/toefl-sum-10).

The primary purpose of this paper is to review how reading in English (L2) is being taught in Japanese Universities with the hope that more extensive reading activities in L2 will be introduced into the undergraduate curricula. This study will first review the literature on teaching reading in English L2. Then a definition of reading and brief explanation of that cognitive process will follow. This will include an overview on the two major types of reading: intensive and extensive. The second portion of the paper will analyze Japanese college students' attitudes towards reading in their L2.

2 . The Classical Method of Teaching Reading

Historically, the purpose of teaching reading in EFL classes to Japanese university students has been primarily so they can have access to literature written in English. As English language instruction at the tertiary level in Japan dramatically expanded in the 1950's and 60's, the "grammar translation method" became the norm and still continues to be ingrained and practiced although not officially endorsed by the Ministry of Education. New guidelines for the teaching of English in secondary schools were put into effect in 2007 stressing the teaching of communicative English; but instruction in the classical grammar translation method is still the norm.

The type of reading that Japanese students learn in secondary schools can be defined as "intensive reading" which reinforces the grammar translation approach. In other words students are not required or taught how to think in their L2. While the "grammar translation method" has some benefits, it often leads to students only

memorizing vocabulary and studying grammar that they soon forget after the university entrance examinations are completed. Intensive reading can be characterized by the following traits :

- a . the focus is on the language
- b . it is skill-based
- c . it is text-based
- d . it is teacher-centered

The “classical method” as it is officially known can best be summarized by the following characteristics as mentioned in Brown’s text (2007 : p. 16).

- a . classes are taught in the mother tongue
- b . vocabulary are introduced as lists of isolated words
- c . intricacies of grammar are stressed
- d . reading of difficult classical text is begun early
- e . text are created as exercises in grammatical analysis
- f . occasional drills and exercises in translating sentences
- g . little or no attention is paid to pronunciation

The “classical method” which stresses grammar translation for teaching EFL is still the predominate method used in Japanese high schools as a means of preparing students for university entrance exams. This method concentrates on teaching the students “about the language” not how to communicate in the language.

3 . What is reading and how is it defined ?

While scholars in the fields of linguists and EFL agree that the act reading and teaching reading in L2 is vital to language learning, an agreed definition of reading is still polemic. Linguists believe the act of reading involves cognitive processes that include different acts depending on the purpose for reading. Based on the reader's purpose, the act of reading according to Grabe(2009) may be defined as a unified construct. Although an exact definition of reading is still being debated in linguistic circles by scholars such as : (Bramford & Day 2002, Brenznitz 2006, Koda 2005, Horiba 2000). These reseachers agree that it is a process that includes the following acts :

- a . reading is a two way process
- b . reading is a strategic process
- c . reading is a flexible process
- d . reading is a purposeful process
- e . reading is an evaluative process

The act of becoming a fluent reader in L2 requires students to learn to how to convert grapheme-phonemic connections into automatic recognition. For students learning to read in their L2 some fundamental components of this process would include :

- a . word recognition
- b . orthographic processing
- c . phonological processing
- d . semantic syntactic processing

A paradigm developed by John Anderson at Carnegie Mellon University in the 1990's, called ACT-R learning theory (Adaptive Control of Thought Rational) serves as framework for comprehending the complex processes involved in the act of reading. Educational psychologists such as, (Polk & Seifert 2002 ; Anderson, Bothell & Matessa 1998) contend that ACTR theory can help educators understand that learning to read requires mastery of subcomponents in an ordered structure. This intricate cognitive process involves a transition between the reader, text, and context to construct meaning from printed materials.

Most scholars in the field of reading research support the hypothesis that word recognition is the most important ingredient in reading comprehension. According to Perfetti, (2007) word recognition involves the interaction of activated orthographic, phonological, and semantic and syntactic processes. His *Constituency Model and Lexical Quality Hypothesis* purports the need for students to develop a larger frequent word vocabulary through extensive reading which reinforces the opportunities to build expanded word knowledge. This process leads to greater fluency and improved comprehension according to Walczk & Breznitz (2006).

4 . Extensive Reading

The concept of extensive reading was first developed and coined by two British language scholars : Harold Palmer (1917) and Michael West (1926). As early pioneers in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) they were the first to propose a hypothesis linking extensive reading in L2 and with language acquisition. The key points summarizing their theory about extensive reading are :

- a . students should read in their L2 without a conscious effort to translate

- b. emphasis should be placed on developing independent silent reading habits

Current scholars in the field of teaching reading such as Day & Bramford (2008) contend that students attempting to read in their L2 should concentrate on the meaning of vocabulary and not the language. Proponents of extensive reading often cite Krashin's "input theory" (1982) as empirical evidence that extensive reading in L2 enhances language acquisition. Basically, Krashin's theory known as the Natural Approach believes that learners of a second language should be exposed to large amounts of second language input that would include reading as much as possible in L2. Krashin and others who support "input theory" believe that the reading material should be interesting, relevant, and not necessarily grammatically sequenced. They are firm believers that extensive reading(ER) in L2 will augment language acquisition. Most EFL researchers (Akamatsu, 2006, Day, 2006, Grabe, 2009) for example acknowledge there is a correlation between extensive reading and second language acquisition; however(Cobb, 2007) disputes its importance. Although this paper is not a comparative study it does side with those who support the connection between L1 reading and L2.

5. Reading Types and Purposes

As reading materials and various forms of printed matter continue to expand, technology has rapidly transformed the way these items are disseminated to both public and private readers. This also means the ways and purposes for reading are also changing. With the increasing speed by which information is exchanged on the Web via e-mail, blogs, twitter, and other social media sights like Facebook, the types of reading that Japanese EFL students are doing and will be doing in the future will be more for personal knowledge, information, and pleasure which are all the

underlying foundations of extensive reading. Before devolving into the merits of extensive reading, here are some other well know types of reading that important in both L1 and L2.

- a . reading to search for information (scanning and skimming)
- b . reading for quick information
- c . reading to learn
- d . reading to integrate information
- e . reading to evaluate, critique, and use information
- f . reading for general comprehension

6 . A Survey of Students' Attitudes Towards Reading

This portion of the paper is an attempt to learn more about students' attitudes towards extensive reading. This section basically discusses a small-scale action research project conducted on during the 2011 academic year. A survey regarding students' opinions and habits of reading in both L1 and L2 was administered in the students' native language (Appendage(A) English version and Appendage(B) for the Japanese translated version. The survey was administered at the beginning of the academic year in late April and then again towards the end of the academic year in mid-December, 2011.

6.1. Methods

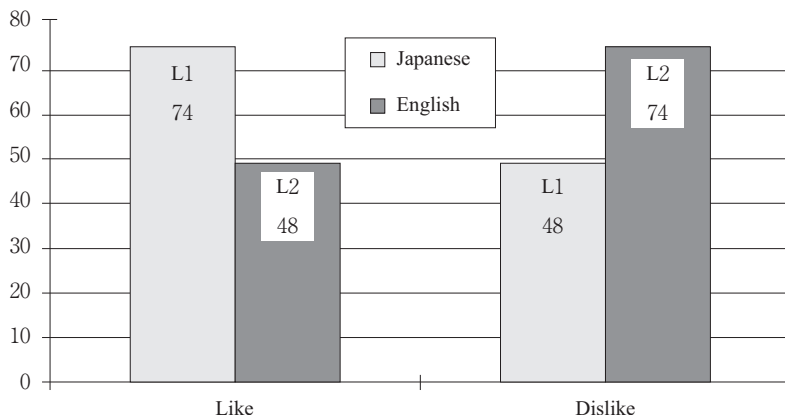
The hypothesis was that extensive reading increases students' motivation to read more in their L2. Students sampled for the survey questionnaire were divided into two groups : one group in which Graded Readers (GR) were a requirement for the course and another group in which Graded Readers were not part of the course

requirements. Each group consisted of three separate classes of a required course for EFL students majoring in English and included freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. Quantitative data from the survey is reported in tables and simple percentages. Qualitative data based on follow up interviews with students is included and discussed with an interpretation of the survey results.

7. Survey Results

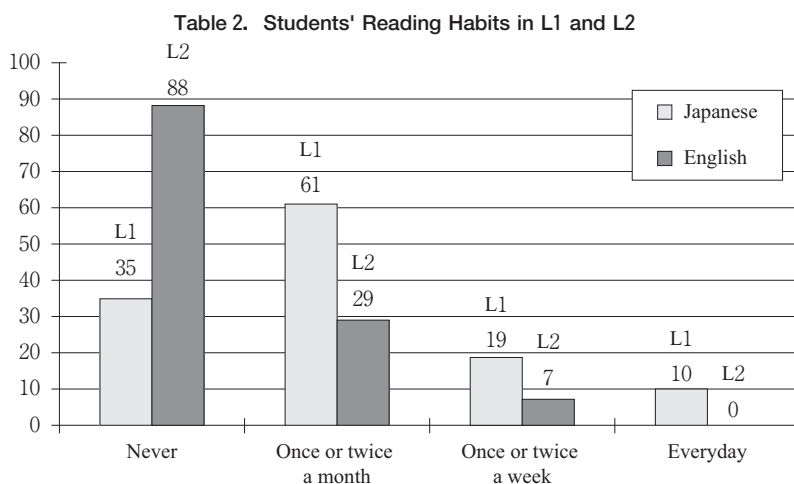
Without going through the survey document in chronological order, the final question will serve as the starting point for data analysis. Question number 12 is a straight forward “yes” or “no” question. It asked the students if they think reading in English will be helpful in their future. Surprisingly out of the approximately 120 students sampled each semester, only two students responded “no” to that question. Therefore, it seems quite clear that Japanese college students or maybe only those in the English language department think the ability to read in English is important.

Table 1. Students' Attitudes Towards Reading in L1 and L2



However, when analyzing students' attitudes towards reading in English, there appeared to be a wide discrepancy between their perception of reading ability in English as being important and their attitude towards reading in English. The fourth item on the survey was a “yes” and “no” question that asked the students directly if they liked reading in English. The vast majority of the respondents indicated that they did not enjoy or like reading in English.

This trend may not be surprising since most Japanese students L2 reading experiences prior to entering a university are primarily “intensive” type activities with the purpose of preparing for university entrance examinations. Also, after entering the university only a few students seem to have engaged in “extensive” reading for pleasure. While reading for pleasure could and does include a broad range of activities, the survey revealed that less than 25% of the students had experienced reading Graded Readers before entering the university.



Question number six of the survey revealed the sobering trend that students seldom, if ever read in English for pleasure. While reading for pleasure can be defined in various ways such as reading a blog, text message, or short e-mail, the survey question defined “reading for pleasure” as a passage of 250 words or more. However, this question failed to take into account that reading for pleasure could have included classroom and/or homework assignments. Despite the poorly worded question, all the respondents indicated that they never read for pleasure in English everyday. From the sample of 123 students, which included freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, only 8 students indicated that they read for pleasure every week. When excluding the classes in which Graded Readers were required, the percentage of students who indicated they never read for pleasure in English measured at 89% of the respondents. In comparing those figures with students’ reading patterns in their native language close to 30% of the students responded that they never read for pleasure in their native language. Although this study is not purposefully examining the link between reading in L1 and L2, it is an important cognitive and psychological concept that affects L2 reading development (Ehrie 1995; Esky and Grabe 1988; Gough 1995; and Stanovich 2000).

Along with the survey that was administered at the beginning and end of the academic year, qualitative data regarding students’ attitudes towards reading Graded Readers was elicited from the classes in which extensive reading was part of the course requirement. The following quotes were written in English by first year students in a low-level ELF class as partial verification that extensive reading plays a vital role in second language acquisition.

The following are some quotes from freshmen ELF students regarding their attitudes and feelings about extensive reading activities after two semesters.

- a . “I can read more faster.”
- b . “The more I read, the faster I understand English and I can study English grammar.”
- c . “I can read quickly.”
- d . “I can learn English pleasantly by Graded Readers.”
- e . “It was fun for me to read English books. I want to read a lot of book. The story was interesting. I think I want to read more.”
- f . “If I don’t know the word, I guess meaning from context.”
- g . “Book let me imagine.”
- h . “First, I didn’t like English book. When I could read without the dictionary, I feel good. I want to read many books during vacation.”
- i . “I didn’t like reading English book before. Because I thought it was difficult for me. However I feel good after reading Graded Readers. I love someone life story, so I want to read more. My goal is reading 20 books next year.”

The comments by these young EFL students reinforce Palmer & West’s hypothesis linking extensive reading in L2 with language acquisition. As a professional educator, what is more exciting than helping students discover for themselves the joy of reading and learning autonomously. From an educational psychological perspective, extensive reading can help spark autonomous learning and more self-motivation as demonstrated by some of the comments listed above.

In order to keep that spark of self-motivation alive, students need to be encouraged to discover sources of reading material other than Graded Readers. Graded Readers are an excellent source for introducing ELF students into the world of reading for pleasure or “extensive reading” in L2. However, other sources of

reading materials and different genres may help widen students' interest in reading for pleasure. In responding to survey question number 8, the majority of the respondents indicated they read books in their L2. Upon review the question was poorly written and does not distinguish textbook (ie. intensive reading) from extensive reading. The second most selected response to same question was "none" which confirms the students have few options and/or little interest in reading in L2 for pleasure. Regarding reading preferences in L1 (question #7) students' preferences in order were: fashion magazines, books, and comics. To facilitate more extensive reading outside regular classroom activities, maybe EFL instructors could introduce magazines and/or articles more closely connected with students' personal interest. The following comments written by a third year student at the end of second semester reinforce this idea.

"I think it's a good thing to learn English, but I have a suggestion. How about reading various things. Not only book in library but also own favorite book (English) and article in newspaper? Sometimes I feel boring to read Graded Readers. If students read book or article that they have interest, they would do more highly motivated."

According to the survey data, less than 25% of the students had experienced reading GR type books before entering a university. In analyzing question number 10, when excluding the classes in which GR reading was required, only 9% of the students indicated that they had read GR-type books for pleasure. More follow up analysis needs to be done to help determine what factors could help in motivating students to do extensive reading in their L2. In trying to gather data along that line, question number 11 asked the students if they read any GR books without being assigned. A disappointing 78% of the students responded, "No." This fact

highlights the discrepancy between students' perceived value of reading in English (survey question #12) and their lack of desire to read in L2 without being assigned a task or project.

8 . Summary

It is quite evident that most Japanese EFL students are aware that reading in L2 will be beneficial for their future life. However, it is also quite apparent that most young EFL students at this university lack self-motivation and an awareness of autonomous learning. Some of the blame for this can surely be placed on the “entrance exam system” and rote memorization type of testing that permeates the entire high school educational system.

Prior to entering universities, very few students have experienced reading in L2 without preparing for a grammar translation type of activity or a test. While university ELF professionals cannot change the educational system, we can and should introduce extensive reading activities to our students.

In this small study classes in which GR reading was required, students responses in interviews indicated that they did increase their vocabulary and ability to understand the new words from the context of the story. Most freshmen indicated that they had never experienced reading without consulting a dictionary before. They liked the fact that they could choose their own level of Graded Reader. The vast majority of students in all three levels (freshmen, sophomores, and juniors) enjoyed the extensive reading activities even though it was a required homework activity. A few students indicated that extensive reading increased their motivation to read more. Further investigation needs to be done to determine if

there is a link between increased reading fluency in L2 and self-motivation.

This rather crude research paper does not offer any practical steps or suggestions on how to introduce extensive reading into EFL classrooms. In fact the survey questionnaire was poorly designed and not properly pre-tested. However, the qualitative data gathered from interviews and an informal survey with students revealed that once they really experience reading easier material (ie. Graded Readers) in English they increased their L2 vocabulary, and their ability to understand the meaning of new words from the context. Students in the control group also indicated that their reading speed and fluency increased. This paper does not have the statistical data to verify what the students indicated verbally, but hopefully the next one will.

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10. Appendage A. Survey Questionnaire (English version)

Instructions : Please circle one answer. However, for questions #6 and #7 you may circle as many answers as you wish.

1 . What is your gender ?

a . female

b . male

2 . Do you like reading in your native language ?

a . no

b . yes

3 . Do you like reading in English ?

a . no

b . yes

4 . How often do you read (for pleasure) in your native language ?

Reading an article or story of at least 250 words or more.

a . never

b . once or twice a month

c . once or twice a week

d . every day

5. How often do you read (for pleasure) in English ?

Reading an article or story of at least 250 words or more.

- a . never
- b . once or twice a month
- c . once or twice a week
- d . every day

6 . What kinds of materials do you read in your native language ?

- a . none
- b . comic books
- c . fashion magazines
- d . food magazines
- e . music magazines
- f . sports magazines
- g . material from the Web (Internet)
- h . books (fiction & non-fiction)
- i . others

7 . What kinds of materials do you read in English ?

- a . none
- b . comic books
- c . fashion magazines
- d . food magazines
- e . music magazines
- f . sports magazines
- g . material from the Web (Internet)

h . books (fiction & non-fiction)

i . others

8 . Before entering this university have you read any Graded Readers in English ?

a . no

b . yes

9 . After entering this university have you read any Graded Readers in English ?

a . no

b . yes

Number (if any) _____

10. Do you ever read Graded Readers without being assigned by a teacher ?

a . no

b . yes

11. Do you enjoy reading Graded Readers ?

a . no

b . yes

12. Do you think the ability to read in English will help you in the future ?

a . no

b . yes

11. Appendage B (Survey Japanese Version)

アンケート

あてはまるものに1つ○をしてください。No. 6, No. 7は該当するものがあれば2つ以上○をしてもかまいません。

1. あなたの性別は？a. 女b. 男

2. 本を読むのは好きですか。a. いいえb. はい

3. 英語の本を読むのは好きですか。a. いいえb. はい

4. 母国語での読書（娯楽として）は、どのくらいしますか。
（記事または物語など250語以上のもの。）
a. しない。b. 月に1, 2回。
c. 週に1, 2回。d. ほぼ毎日。

5. 英語での読書（娯楽として）は、どのくらいしますか。
（記事または物語など250語以上のもの。）
a. しない。b. 月に1, 2回。
c. 週に1, 2回。d. ほぼ毎日。

6. 母国語でどのような本を読みますか。
a. 読まない。b. マンガc. ファッション雑誌
d. 食に関する雑誌e. 音楽雑誌f. スポーツ雑誌
g. インターネットに関するもの
h. 書籍（フィクションおよびノンフィクション）i. その他

7. 英語でどのような本を読みますか。

- a. 読まない。 b. マンガ c. ファッション雑誌
d. 食に関する雑誌 e. 音楽雑誌 f. スポーツ雑誌
g. インターネットに関するもの
h. 書籍（フィクションおよびノンフィクション） i. その他

8. 大学に入学する以前に、レベル別の英文読み物を読んだことがありますか。

- a. いいえ。 b. はい。（ 冊）

9. 大学に入学後、レベル別の英文読み物を読みましたか。

- a. いいえ。 b. はい。（ 冊）

10. 宿題や与えられたプロジェクト以外で、レベル別の英文読み物を読んだことがありますか。

- a. いいえ。 b. はい。

11. レベル別英文読み物を読むのは好きですか。

- a. いいえ。 b. はい。 c. わからない。

12. 英語の読解力は将来自分に役立つと思いますか。

- a. いいえ。 b. はい。